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ABSTRACT

In response to severe budget restrictions and a shortage of qualified graduate students, a basic speech communications course instituted three innovations: use of undergraduate teaching assistants, contiguous scheduling of lecture and breakdown rooms, and the publication of a textbook supplement with detailed activity guidelines and examples. With these innovations, a single faculty member and one half-time master's degree candidate were able to offer 1000 students per semester a rigorous hybrid course that included informatics and persuasive public speaking. Chosen from students who had already successfully completed the course, the undergraduate assistants were familiar with the course content, goals, and procedures. They acted as effective course facilitators while saving the department a large amount of money in salaries. By scheduling lecture and breakdown rooms simultaneously, the course director gained flexibility in shifting from large to small group activities. As the course-specific textbook freed teaching assistants from acting as discussion leaders, the course director retained control over course content and grading despite the large number of students enrolled. Several simple innovations thus permitted the incorporation of a mass lecture format into a performance based course. (MM)

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MAXIMIZING QUALITY--MINIMIZING COSTS:
The Use of Undergraduate TA's In the Basic Course

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MAXIMIZING QUALITY--MINIMIZING COSTS:
The Use of Undergraduate TA's in the Basic Costs

Even the most superficial survey of attitudes toward the basic communication course at large universities would reconfirm the observations made by Judy Pearson and her colleagues in 1981.[1] Specifically, that students and alumni perceive the ideal course to be a hybrid that combines a treatment of broad theoretical perspectives with at least two pragmatic public speaking experiences. Moreover, any survey would almost certainly reconfirm her concluding observation that found " . . . both alumni and students favoring autonomous classes; and a strong preference for limiting classes to twenty to twenty-five students or smaller."[2] Realistically, however, if a department is expected to service thousands of students each year this delivery format could easily call for the employment of forty or fifty persons. As a result, few departments seem to be in a position to continue offering the small self-contained class. Economic demands overrule pedagogic desires. Many departments are forced to adopt mass-delivery formats that will enable them to economically deliver quality instruction to thousands of students a year.

Such was the case at Arizona state University. As a means of coping with increasingly severe budget restrictions and a concomitant shortage of qualified graduate students to help teach the basic course, three innovations have been instituted so that a single faculty member and one half-time administrative assistant, a masters candidate, can offer one thousand students a semester a rigorous hybrid course that includes informative and persuasive public speech performances. The resulting system has proven so successful during the two years it has been in operation that enrollments have steadily increased despite the fact that it is identified as a rigorous course with a GPA that falls below the college mean. In fact, we now must turn hundreds of students away because

we have exceeded the capacity of the room used for the mass lecture portion of the course.

Briefly, the three innovations that make it possible for us to service such a large population with such limited resources include: 1) the utilization of undergraduate teaching assistants; 2) contiguous scheduling of lecture-breakdown rooms; and 3) the publication of a textbook supplement with detailed activity guidelines and examples. Each of these innovations will be explained below.

UNDERGRADUATE TA'S

Each semester the staff helps to generate a pool of prospective undergraduate TA's by identifying suitable candidates from among persons earning a grade of A or B. Nominees are then invited to enroll in an upper division course entitled "Classroom Apprenticeship" so they may earn three hours of ungraded credit as compensation for their labor.[3] Selected students are then assigned, often as dyads, to staff one of the forty breakdown groups.

This selection procedure assures that TA's will be familiar and comfortable both with the content of the lectures as well as with the goals and procedures for most of the small group learning activities. In other words, their student based experience with communication models, relationship development activities, small group discussion projects, conflict game paradigms and even listening improvement exercises prepare them to serve as excellent project facilitators. Above all, however, since the TA's have already had success preparing and delivering speeches according to the model prescribed by the course, they are able to function as substantive aids for students struggling with the informative and persuasive speech activities. As a result, we find our students giving speeches of remarkable substance, clarity and effectiveness.

In general, by constantly recycling our best students back into the course, we experience a steady increase in the quality of the overall program. Historically, on the other hand, when we utilized masters level graduate students as staff for the breakdown sections we had significant difficulties getting all the TA's to become enthusiastic, competent, and loyal members of the team. In part this was caused by the fact that they came from divergent backgrounds and were pursuing disparate career paths. Then too, since each breakdown section is rigidly structured, many masters level TA's tend to resent the absence of classroom autonomy and thus seek to regain a measure of academic freedom by abbreviating recommended activities so as to create an opportunity for innovation. Regardless of the cause, however, when we were using masters candidates to help with the basic course, the first semester of each year found us returning to ground zero. Each Fall, the students suffered as their TA's learned the ropes. By the second semester, though, the basic course director suffered because the TA's no longer felt that they could benefit from attending lectures and the climate in the mass lecture sessions suffered accordingly. Moreover, the increasing experimentation by the TA's produced disparity between the sections and dissension among the students. Grade inflation ran rampant.

In addition to improving the quality of the course, the utilization of undergraduate TA's offers some other benefits. Economically, publishing firms supplying our textbooks save the cost of desk copies because the staff already owns the needed materials. More significantly, the department saves about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars by not having to expend the funds needed to hire the fifteen to twenty graduate assistants that would normally be required to staff a course of this size.

Pedagogically, because masters level TA's are excused from teaching the basic course, they can be assigned to handle sections of other large enrollment

courses such as small group communication or public speaking. Others can be freed up to serve as research assistants for productive faculty members.

SCHEDULING

Lectures and breakdown rooms are scheduled to occur in a single time block. For example the 12:40-1:30 class scheduled for Monday-Wednesday-Friday is simultaneously assigned to a five hundred seat lecture hall and twenty regular classrooms in various buildings and around campus. Consequently, it is possible to move the class form the lecture format into the small group experience at will.

This flexibility enables the course director to plan a daily course calendar which responds to the logic of the overall course. For example, it is possible to lecture two or even three class periods in a row during the early part of the course where there is a great deal of information to impart. Later on, when students are engaged in the preparation and delivery of public speeches,the mass lecture hall may go unused for as long as two weeks at a time.

Of course, since this format places a heavy burden on the use of classroom facilities, any department that seeks to adopt this formate must be willing to schedule its basic course during relatively low priority time slots. On our campus, the person in charge of rooms scheduling could only accommodate this approach if we were willing to offer the basic course in back-to-back sequence on Mondays-Wednesday-Fridays at 12:40 and 1:40. Apparently, all mornings and even Tuesday-Thursday afternoon time slots are so popular with most professors that it would be impossible to find a large block of available rooms for any single department.

Room availability aside, the decision to abandon the traditional lecture-lab format offers a basic course director several advantages. In addition to being able to freely schedule several sequential class sessions for

either lecture of performance activities, this format enables a course director to prepare students for a small group learning experience during a mass lecture and then follow up on that experience at the next lecture. For example, a Monday lecture could help students and TA's alike prepare for a listening exercise. The Wednesday class would then meet in breakdown rooms and complete the activity. On Friday, the group could again come to the mass lecture hall where the course director could begin the session with a review of Wednesday's learning activity. Following such a format, the course director could not only assist the novice teachers with their management of the breakdown section, he or she can simultaneously assure that all aspects of the course maintain a high level of academic rigor and relevance for the student.

Strategically, every student stays in step under this system. Consequently, all students are equally prepared for examinations. All student get identical opportunities to prepare for speeches.[4] In fact, this format enables all students to perceive the basic course to be consistent and fair. Even with rigorous grading policies, therefore, the course receives unusually positive evaluations from the students.

COURSE SPECIFIC TEXTBOOK

As a supplement to the text by Stewart L. Tubbs and Sylvia Moss (Human Communication, 4th ed., New York: Random House, 1983), it has proven helpful to prepare a 300 page course specific textbook (Communication, 2nd ed., Dubuque, Iowa: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1983). The supplement, among other things, includes an eight page syllabus and a ten page research questionnaire along with approximately fifteen pages of "tear out" material such as speech feedback forms and activity worksheets. On a yearly basis, therefore, students pay for approximately 66,000 sheets of paper that would ordinarily be supplied by the department. At current rates, this amounts to a savings of over three

hundred and fifty dollars. In addition to saving money, however, this text also enables the department to receive almost $2000 each year in royalty payments from Gorsuch/Scarisbrick. Therefore, by both saving and earning money, the publication of a course specific text proves to be an economic boon for the department.

Money issues aside, however, there are ample academic reasons for creating these course specific texts. Most significantly, the book enables the basic course director to maintain full control over the rigor of the course and the determination of all grade--even the grades assigned to the public speaking activities. This control over content and grading is accomplished in two ways.

First, content is controlled when course specific definitions, models, concepts and perspectives are published because each student is given two opportunities to receive information--once from the lecture and once from the readings. TA's, therefore, do not need to function as discussion leaders. Consequently, the testing program, which accounts for 100 of the 150 points in the course, can be totally controlled by the course director. In other words, undergraduate TA's do not help the course director create examinations or help students review for tests. Rather, with but one exception, they simply facilitate the presentation of enrichment experiences for the student up until the time speeches begin. This exception involves the grading of a one page "application paper" worth five points on our one hundred and fifty point system. Even with this activity, however, the course-specific text assists with both the instruction and evaluation of the assignment by offering good and bad examples while simultaneously presenting concrete variable for the assignment of points; Acceptable typing and layout = +1 pt; proper use of APA or MLA citation formats in the footnotes = +1 pt; absence of spelling errors = +1 pt; absence of grammatical errors = +1 pt; and, a final subjective judgment as to the accuracy and quality of the "application" = +1 pt.

Secondly, by publishing an inflexible model for the application paper and the two speeches, the course director can legitimately control all grading processes by differentiating between content and performance issues. As a result, the TA directly controls only 1 of 5 points in the application paper and only 1 or 2 of the 20 points in the public speaking activities. For speeches, this minimization of gradebook responsibility is accomplished through the process explained below.

Speeches always occur across a Monday-Wednesday-Friday sequence so the grading process can take place over the weekend. On Monday, TA_5's collect the typed, three page speech analysis materials from all students. They then assign between six and eight individuals to each of the three speech performance groups. Each day, as students perform, the TA's tape record all speeches so there is a basis for students to appeal their grade to the course director.

For each of the three performance sessions the TA's and two audience members complete a detailed speech feedback form for the speakers. These feedback forms are attached to the speech analysis material to create a six page packet of materials.

At the end of each day, all persons in the class (speakers included) rank order the six to eight speeches that were given. The TA's compute the rank ordering for each speaker and record the results on the student's packet.

On Friday, once all speeches have been delivered, the TA's compile a final rank-ordering for their breakdown sections. In other words, they take the speech analysis packets from each of the three performance days and squeeze them together. In effect, this forces them to make a judgment as to which of the three speeches that have been ranked as number one during the day-to-day rankings will in fact come forth on top of the pile.

By Friday evening, the course director receives approximately twenty-four rank-ordered speech analysis packets from each of the TA's These packets are spread across available conference tables so that the message skeleton (purpose statement, organizing questions, and three parallel main idea statements) for each speaker is visible. When the five hundred speeches from all twenty breakdown groups are thus displayed, the course director then performs a two stage evaluation process.

The first task calls for a review of the rankings. The top two or three speeches for each breakdown group are compared to make sure that there is a fundamental comparability across all twenty sections. Next, a tentative "B-C" breakpoint is identified and marked with a sheet of paper. Speeches above this "B-C" line are then reviewed to make sure that the "minimal level" of competency" guidelines for the activity have been satisfied. With the informative speech, for example, this implies that the purpose statement avoids making a judgment about the topic. The organizing questions accurately translates the purpose statement into a receiver centered perspective. Three main ideas, stated in parallel language, adequately answer the organizing question. The following typifies a successful informative speech skeleton:

Purpose Statement: I want my audience to understand the effect of Anorexia Nervosa.

Organizing Questions: What are the effects of Anorexia Nervosa?

Main Ideas:
A. Anorexia Nervosa affects persons psychologically.
B. Anorexia Nervosa affects persons physically.
C. Anorexia Nervosa affects persons socially.

When substantive errors are detected, the student's speech analysis packet is marked "flawed," appropriate comments are written throughout the packet and it is then placed below the "B-C" line. Upon the completion of these

modifications of the rank orderings, the assignment of specific grades commmences.

The second task, the assignment of specific grade points to each speech, is quite simple once the final rank ordering process is complete. With twenty points available, four numbers are assigned to each grade option as follows:

20
19
18
17

16
15
14
13

12
11
10
9

8
7
6
5

0

In a nutshell, it is possible to give twenty points to the top two speakers in each breakdown group. Continuing this process, the first sixteen speakers would receive grades in the "A-B" range. A few students fail the assignment and receive no points but most students receive the grade predicted by their final rank order position with the mean usually falling near thirteen. As such, the speeches contain a good deal of power within the overall structure of the course.

Grading largely by the results of peer rankings, of course, has numerous disadvantages. Even though all breakdown groups are created by random assignment, students occasionally complain about their peers conspiring to give

them a low ranking. When the course director lowers a student's rank ordering in order to account for a "flawed" speech analysis, students challenge our right to utilize written materials as a primary component in a "speech" activity. And finally, the need to listen to recorded speeches during the change of grade appeals process proves to be quite difficult. After the first speech activity, in fact, two full days are consumed by this appeals process. On the positive side, however, since the percentage of flawed speech analysis packets decreases from 20% to fewer than 3% as we move from the informative to the persuasive speeches, this appeals process is difficult only once.

SUMMARY

Despite the inevitable problems that occur whenever economic exigencies force us to adopt mass lecture formats, the experience we are having in this instance suggests that we can successfully offer a performance based course to thousands of students at a time if we adopt some fairly simple innovations. By utilizing undergraduate TA's, the quality of the overall instruction program can actually be improved as successful students are cycled back into the classroom each semester. By utilizing a contigous lecture-breakdown room schedule to replace the traditional lecture-lab format, the learning experience can be controlled with the same general precision common to the standard self-contained classroom. And finally, by offering the students a personalized textbook to supplement lectures and to structure activities, a course director can retain full control over the content of the course and the evaluation of the students.

REFERENCES

[1]Judy C. Pearson, Paul E. Nelson, and Ritch L. Sorenson, "How Students and Alumni Perceive the Basic Course," Communication Education, 30 (July, 1981), 196-99.

[2]Ibid, p. 299.

[3]As an interesting side benefit, since our 75 undergraduate TA's pay $46 for each credit hour, the university makes $10,350 from the use of these students because they pay for this opportunity to serve our program but not receive a formal classroom experience in return. If we employed twenty masters degree candidates to replace these undergraduates, it would costs the university $150,000. Each year, therefore, our 2000 students pay out $276,000 in tuition fees for this course while the university is able to offer the instruction for a cost of only $10,000.

[4]The three page typed "speech analysis that is required from all students is due on the first day of speeches. As a result, no student is given an extra amount of time to prepare for this assignment.

[5]The first page contains nothing but the "speech skeleton:" A purpose statement; the receiver-centered organizing question; and three parallel main ideas that respond to the organizing question. The second page contains the speech introduction. The third page contains a full sentence outline of the message.